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## WHO BUILT THE ARCH OF CONSTANTINE?

### IV. THE EIGHT MEDALLIONS OF DOMITIAN <sup>1</sup>

IN THE papers thus far published on the arch, after the introductory paper in which I sought to prove that it was built by Domitian (87-96 A.D.), I studied some of the sculptures that were added to the original arch during the third and fourth centuries; either by cutting them in the Domitianic masonry, as was the case with the triumphal frieze across the east and west ends, or by transferring them bodily to the arch from some other structure, as was the case with the attic reliefs and the friezes on the north façade, or else by carving them expressly for the arch and inserting them, as in the case of two medallions of the east and west ends, and the spandrel figures.

In the present paper I shall attack the even more fundamental subject of sculptures which I attribute to the original decoration of the arch, and therefore to the reign of Domitian himself. While my general thesis cannot be said to stand or fall by this test, it will be greatly strengthened if I am able to show that sculptures generally conceded to belong, by their artistic qualities, to the time of Domitian, are so related to the structure of the arch as to make it seem almost or entirely certain that they formed part of the original construction; and also that they and their surroundings were afterward modified during the changes to which the arch was subjected before and during the time of Constantine, in such a way as to add to the probability that they were there already, before these changes took place.

Such sculptures I believe to be the eight medallions of the two main façades, and the four keystones of the minor arcades, only one of which, however, has escaped more or less complete destruction.

The eight medallions are in two groups: those in Figure 1 are the group on the south façade; in Figure 2 are those on the

<sup>1</sup> See *A.J.A.* XVI, 1912, pp. 368 ff., XVII, 1913, pp. 487 ff., and XIX, 1915, pp. 1 ff.

north façade. Any apparent differences are due to the different weathering and light. Their average diameter is *ca.* 2.35 m., and they are carved in a single slab of marble. They are grouped in pairs over each of the minor openings of the arch in a panel; Figure 3 will show how they were connected with the decorative scheme.



FIGURE 1.—MEDALLIONS ON THE SOUTH FAÇADE OF THE ARCH OF CONSTANTINE (from Mrs. Strong, *Roman Sculpture*)

These eight medallions have attracted more attention and admiration than any of the other reliefs, not only on account of their artistic merit, but from the mystery that surrounds them. There is a unity of theme running through all of them; it is the hunting exploits of some emperor. Who this emperor was cannot be proved, but I believe him to be Domitian. The

scenes were so harmlessly impersonal that it was not felt necessary to destroy them when the arch was dismantled after Domitian's death. The changing of one of the imperial heads into a portrait of another emperor, conjectured by different critics to be Claudius Gothicus or Carus or Philip,<sup>1</sup> and of another original imperial head into one supposed to be Carinus or Con-



FIGURE 2.—MEDALLIONS ON THE NORTH FACADE OF THE ARCH OF CONSTANTINE (from Mrs. Strong, *Roman Sculpture*)

stantius Chlorus,<sup>2</sup> has puzzled recent critics who vary in their

<sup>1</sup> This is the Sacrifice to Hercules (N. 4), where the imperial head is so evidently recut away from the sacrificial headdress.

<sup>2</sup> The Sacrifice to Apollo (N. 2), which is not really a sacrifice, as the head is not veiled. It is probable that the original head was veiled and that in the recutting the drapery was cut away.

identifications. Another interesting change of the same class is the complete substitution (not recutting) of a head of Constantine for that of the original emperor.<sup>1</sup> In all four of these south medallions the emperor's head is enclosed in a circular nimbus,<sup>2</sup> a rare official Roman case of the recognition of the Sun-cult as the religion of the state, analogous to the recognition of the Mithraic cult by Diocletian in the base of his Memorial Column to which I recently called attention in this *JOURNAL* (XVIII, 1914, pp. 146 ff.), where Mithra himself has the nimbus, not, in this case, a simple but a rayed circle. Recent studies have made it abundantly clear that, for several years after the time when the Arch of Constantine was remodelled and dedicated to him, Constantine was officially regarded as a Sun worshipper.

The imperial heads in the four medallions on the opposite or south façade present quite a different puzzle. Only in one case is the head at all preserved—in the Sacrifice to Diana (S. 4). Here there is no fracture at the neck. The head is original. Neither is there any trace of recutting in third century technique. Yet it is difficult to assert that the features are Domitianic, because they have been so badly obliterated by fire. In fact Miss Bieber believes the face recut into a portrait of Constantine! In the Bear Hunt (S. 3) the entire face has been calcined away, but the neck shows again that there was no substitution; though whether there was recutting we have absolutely

<sup>1</sup> The Boar Hunt (N. 1) and the Lion Hunt (N. 3). In both cases the break at the neck is quite clear.

<sup>2</sup> It is supposed that the nimbus was added by Constantine; and there are still critics who believe it to be due to his conversion to Christianity; and for this reason Philip the Arab is identified with one of the other heads because there is a tradition that he had secretly become a Christian. There is really no foundation for such a fantastic notion. It arises from the quite general ignorance as to the history of the nimbus in pre-Christian and non-Christian spheres. To keep in the sphere of Roman imperialism, there is a notable example of a medallion of the Emperor Diocletian with a nimbus of this same pattern. Now, no one can accuse Diocletian of being a Christian! His nimbus is a sign of his adoption of the solar cult of Mithra in the same way as its use in the case of Constantine is a sign of his worship of the Sun god Apollo. I am preparing material for the history of the nimbus or sun-glory, and this includes examples of practically every century of Greco-Roman art from the fourth century B.C. to the middle Roman Empire. The Christian nimbus was a pure case of the adoption of a perfectly well-known "pagan" symbol, and was due to the association—often expressed—of Christ with the divine Sun. It was plagiarism, pure and simple. During the third century A.D., the prevailing worship was Sun worship.

no means of knowing. In the Departure for the Chase (S. 1), the loss of the head is absolute, also apparently by fire, primarily, and by fracture, secondarily. Finally, in the Sacrifice to Silvanus, besides extensive damage by fire there was a violent fracture, apparently due to the impact of some heavy object falling from above, which split off the whole front of the torso as well as the head. Evidently, then, the current opinion that the four imperial heads on this face were left intact is unprovable in at least two cases, and may be considered only as a probability.

It is only on stylistic grounds that they can, therefore, be ascribed to Domitian; except that in the one case where the original head seems untampered with and merely injured—the Sacrifice to Diana—the evidently delicate and beardless face belongs apparently to an early emperor of the Domitianic type, which would exclude almost any other possibility.

Older critics had attributed the medallions to the reign of Trajan. With the progress made during the last two decades in a critical knowledge of Roman sculpture, two opinions were brought forward, almost simultaneously: one attributing them to Hadrian and the other to Domitian. The majority of critics appear to have adopted the Domitianic theory, which seems to be convincing. Of course it also fits perfectly into my theory of the arch and its decorative history. But, it will not be necessary for me to repeat here the arguments on the Domitianic side.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> They may be seen in brief in Mrs. Strong's *Roman Sculpture*. The promulgator of the Hadrianic theory was Paul Arndt in Bruckmann's *Denkmäler*, pls. 555, 559, 560, 565, published in 1903. The Domitianic theory was presented by Stuart Jones in *Papers of the British School at Rome*, III, pp. 216–271, from a study of the medallions in 1904. This was a great advance on Petersen's monograph in *Röm. Mitt.* IV, 1889, pp. 314–339, where the Trajanic date is still unquestioned. There is a symposium of opinions of Sieveking, Studniczka, Reinach, Espérandieu, S. de Ricci and Bieber in *Revue Archéologique*, XV, 1910, pp. 118–129 (with fine cuts of the heads), p. 170; 1911, p. 465. Sieveking published a detailed study in *Röm. Mitt.* 1907, pp. 365 ff., in which he made a difference between the medallions on the north side, which he thinks Hadrianic and those on the south which he believes to be Domitianic. This theory was opposed by Miss Bieber in *Röm. Mitt.*, 1911, pp. 214 ff., 'Die Medaillons am Konstantinbogen.' She shows how apparent differences in style between the south and north medallions are only apparent and due to different weathering and to different effects of light and shade which affected the photographs on which Sieveking largely based his opinion. Sieveking's partial retraction appeared in *Berl. phil. Woch.* 1911, No. 39. To this explanation of apparent differences I would add the greater damage inflicted on the south medallions by fire.

This paper will deal with the reliefs entirely from the structural point of view, without discussion of questions of style or subject. I make a slight exception in the next few remarks because of a bearing on the questions discussed.

The first exception relates to the heads of emperors already spoken of as changed by substitution or recutting, on the four north medallions: two of the new heads being of Constantine and the other two of two different emperors who cannot be identified with certainty, but are usually thought to belong to the second half of the third century. All four have the solar nimbus. What explanation of these changes can possibly be given on the basis of the old theory that the arch was built by Constantine? The only plausible suggestion that I have noticed makes Constantine the author of all these changes. That he had only two of his own heads used and that for the other two he made portraits of two earlier emperors is supposed to be due to his desire to do honor to and assert family connection with previous Flavii and imperial solar worshippers. Constantine's historians claimed Claudius Gothicus as an ancestor of Constantine, and tried to connect him with the earliest Flavii. But there is a fatal flaw in this argument. Its authors seem unaware of the fact that the heads of these two other emperors—whether they are Philip, Carus, Carinus or some others—are executed in a technique simply impossible in the time of Constantine. This technique, which was current only between *ca.* 230 and 275 A.D., was characterized by abuse of "stippling," flat and thin hair, eyes *à fleur de tête* and other peculiarities which I have noted in a previous paper. It is absolutely distinct from the work done in the time of Diocletian and Constantine.

The real explanation of the changed heads seems to me to be simply this: When the arch was associated during the course of the third century with the triumphs of different emperors, some sculptures were added or changed to record each triumph. In another paper I shall study the eight half figures of emperors crowned by Victories which were inserted in the masonry of the two minor arcades to celebrate their triumphs. These figures are in the various manners of third century sculpture. Apparently it is two of these emperors whose heads were cut on the medallions, probably at the same time that their triumphant figures were inserted in the arcades below.

I merely refer to this detail of the medallions in order to show

that it favors my contention that they formed part of the arch as early as the third century and before, and were modified *in situ* to adjust them to the decorative features that were added and to the remodelling of parts of the arch surface. A more detailed discussion of the heads will be in order in the future paper on the eight imperial portraits of the minor arcades.

Just one more remark before entering upon the constructive discussion. The injury to many of the medallion heads with the greatest projection has already been discussed, as being due partly to fire and partly to the impact of something heavy falling from above. For instance, in the "Sacrifice to Apollo," the head of Apollo and that of the emperor's attendant with the horse were both broken off, recovered and reattached. These heads projected sufficiently (10 to 18 cm.) not to be protected by the frame. I have not questioned the current opinion that the emperor's head is here the original head worked over. But the point is debatable. There is an evident break at the neck; a magnifying glass will, I think, show traces of it even in Figure 2. It may easily be argued that the whole head was done in the time of the emperor whose portrait it is; or, as in the two other cases, the head may have been reattached immediately after the damage done at Domitian's death, and then recut in the third century. In any case, the fractures in these and other figures of the medallions, especially where they are diagonal or almost vertical, distinctly favor my contention that the medallions were damaged by the bronze figures and groups, the marble slabs and statues that were cast down from the attic after the death of Domitian.

Entering now into the heart of my argument, there are five main characteristics that bear on the structural relation of the medallions to the arch: (1) their shape; (2) the shaving of the lower curve of several of them; (3) the closeness of the joints; (4) the treatment of the surface around them; (5) the marble veneer of the enclosing panel.

I. *Shape of the Medallions*.—It has been taken for granted that the single slab on which each medallion is carved was circular and corresponded exactly to the outline of the enclosing frame. Both of these suppositions are wrong. The frame, in the first place, is not a perfect circle. It is so for about three-quarters of its circumference, but the other quarter, corresponding to its base, has been given a slight flattening, a depressed curve which



is so carefully graduated as to have remained unnoticed. In the Boar Hunt scene on the left end of the north side (N. 1) this blunting amounts to four centimetres, as the width of 2.39 m. is reduced in the height to 2.35 m. It must be remembered that the four centimetres are taken from about a quarter of the circumference.

Far more important than this is another fact of which I became aware only when I studied the medallions very closely from the scaffold. It is that this circular-appearing slab rests on a square base; that from a quarter to a fifth of the lower circumference of its frame is not fitted into a slab cut with a curved edge to receive it, as is the case with all the rest of the circumference, but that what appears to be a separate base block is in reality an integral part of the medallion. The true outline of

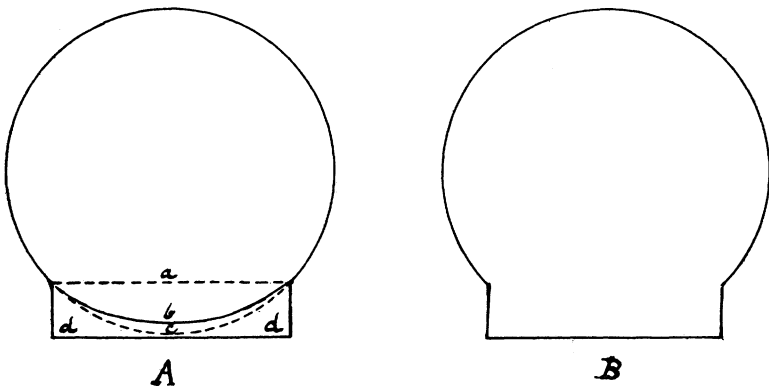


FIGURE 3.—SACRIFICE TO APOLLO (N. 2)

(A shows base-line of figures (a); actual outline of cornice (b); perfect circle (c); and squared base (d). B shows the plain block outline)

the medallion block is given in Figure 3, where in (A) the dotted line stands for the true circle at the base, and the black line for the outline of the actual medallion cornice, while in (B) is the actual shape of the block in which the medallion is cut.

The architects to whom I communicated my discovery of the square base of the medallion blocks were of the opinion that it was a strong argument in favor of my theory that the medallions were an original part of a Domitianic arch, especially in view of the extreme closeness of the joints. In confirmation I ought to call attention to the fact that these medallion blocks are not thin slabs that could easily be transferred. I tried to gauge

their thickness, but found it impossible to run into the joints the thin steel skewer which I had brought for the purpose. Only a long slender hat-pin could be inserted! I ran it to its end without meeting any obstacle so I know that the blocks are more than 35 centimetres thick; how much more I cannot say.

II. *The Cut in the Base of some Medallions.*—The difference between the slight flattening of the lower part of the circle on the north side in medallions 1-3, which was evidently planned at the outset by a keen-eyed and truly aesthetic artist, and the more obvious and crude flattening on the south side has never been noticed, much less explained.

Evidently there must originally have been the same slight flattening as on the north. But, for some reason this original outline was modified at some time. The outline was flattened at least twice as much, in a crude fashion. When this was done



FIGURE 4.—SACRIFICE TO SILVANUS (S. 2); TRIMMED BASE

the encircling frame-moulding must have been so seriously encroached upon that at the extreme base it must have been practically obliterated. It was consequently seen by the stone-cutters that in order to conceal this defect it would be necessary to shave off the face of as much of the lower part of the medallion frame as was affected by this change of outline. In this way the outline of the frame was totally done away with. The tooling of the new surface is very rough and shows its late date, in a period of decadence. In the last medallion on the right there was evidently a slight variation in level, because it was found necessary to trim the bottom but very slightly. The "Sacrifice to Silvanus" (S. 2) in Figure 4 is typical of the three south medallions 1-2-3 in the amount of the trimming.

In order to make the whole matter perfectly clear, I give in Figure 5 a diagram based on the "Sacrifice to Silvanus." It

shows how the vertical line of the square medallion base corresponds to the horizontal base line of the relief and that this point of intersection is the point where the designer broke the line of the circle in order, apparently, to give an appearance of greater stability to his base. This is represented by the dotted line. Then, when the frieze was inserted, the base was trimmed crudely to the present line—not as evenly as in the cut—making a small gap between medallion and frieze.

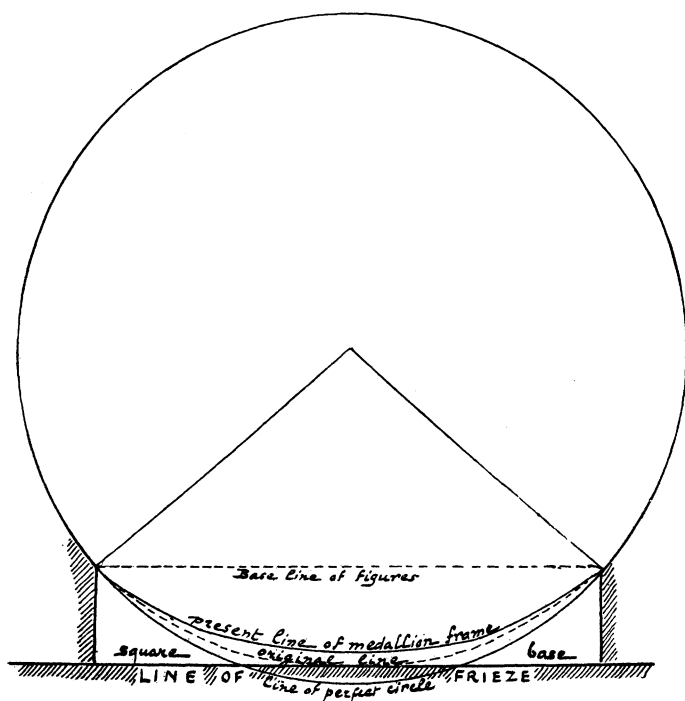


FIGURE 5.—SACRIFICE TO SILVANUS (S. 2); SHOWING VARIATIONS

What was the reason for this mutilation? It seems to me perfectly evident. It constitutes, in fact, one of the most cogent reasons for believing the medallions to be part of a Flavian arch. One has only to note that if this change had *not* been made there would have been absolutely no space between the medallion frames and the friezes below them! Whether the friezes were inserted or were carved in the existing masonry makes no practical difference. At whatever time the frieze was carved or inserted it became absolutely necessary to cut away part of these

medallion frames in order to continue without interruption the panelling of colored marble veneer around the entire medallion.

To a lesser degree the same process was required on one only of the north medallions: the one on the extreme right, the "Sacrifice to Hercules." Here the flattening needed was considerably less, but is quite evident and accompanied by a similar but less extensive cutting away of the frame and lower surface.<sup>1</sup>

III. *Close Joints, Surface Tooling and Veneer.*—If the medallions had been taken from an older monument and been built into the arch in the course of construction in the time of Constantine, they would have been fitted into a wall built of already prepared blocks, which would have been set with their faces sufficiently in retreat to allow of receiving a marble veneer without the need to cut them back again. The architect would in that case have been perfectly free to place them at any height and in any relation to the other decorative features that he chose. He would have arranged the sculptured friezes under the medallions in such a way that each should not interfere with the other, but they should have an adequate space between them for the enclosing marble veneer.

Now, it is perfectly evident that things did not happen in this way. We have already seen that the architect could not have been free to correlate as he pleased the friezes and medallions, but was obliged to mutilate half of the medallions to get room for the friezes. Also a glance at Figure 7 will show that the use of a veneer could not have been present in the mind of the architect when the medallions were set in the arch because the blocks were refaced and cut back *in situ*, when the medallions were already in place, if we can trust the evidence that stares at us from the panels.

There is a great difference between the south and north sides in the condition of the surface of the panels. On the north we can study it as it was originally recut, some time in the third century; but on the south side it is impossible to be at all sure of the date of the present surfacing, which is a pot-pourri of rough and smooth masonry, with occasional wide joints. The masonry of the north side shows extraordinarily close joints everywhere.

<sup>1</sup> In the medallion to the left—the Lion Hunt—it is not easy to say whether there may not be a slight blunting because, as the body of the lion both interrupts the frame in any case and also gives a naturally irregular outline, the question is an open one.

Moreover, the courses are formed, at the base, of vertical, not of horizontal blocks, giving much wider courses, and showing how the designer planned the masonry with due regard for the insertion of the medallions at this level. In connection with the closeness of the joints, I would call attention to the contrast with the loose joints on the upper line of the friezes, as a further indication that these friezes were inserted.

The next point is the tooling of the surface of the panels. I am inclined to believe that these panels were not formed around the medallions at the time of the first restoration of the arch; that is to say when the columns were added, the main cornice restored, and the *resaults* added to it above the columns. It seems as if when the pilaster responds to these columns were set into the arch the original surface still existed. Of course, the theory that I hold of successive additions during the third century in connection with the triumphs of different emperors, involves a different date for, let us say, the insertion of each pair of friezes. The two north friezes were set in, I believe, at a different time from the two south friezes; and the triumphal friezes on the two short east and west ends, with their short returns on the north and south fronts, belong to a third and still later date, as they presuppose the existence of the other friezes.<sup>1</sup> I shall not enter into this question here, and mention it merely because it was necessary to say this in order to explain that the panelling of the north face was done at a different time from that of the south face (probably earlier) and this may explain the difference in technique.

I do not think that, on reflection, any critic would contend that the use of a veneer in these panels was part of the original plan. There are two reasons not already mentioned. The first is that where a marble facing is found it is set against a core of rubble, of brick, or, in earlier times, of travertine. But in this arch the structure itself is of marble blocks, so that marble upon marble is like painting the lily. The application of a marble veneer to a marble structure must therefore be due to circumstances arising after the erection of the structure. The second

<sup>1</sup> If there had been no friezes already on the main faces of the arch when the triumphal procession was cut into its surface, there is no doubt in my mind that this procession would have started on the left end of the north face and occupied the spaces over the minor arcades. It is quite abnormal that it should be split up as it is; it is so by *force majeure*, owing to pre-existing circumstances.

reason is the special nature of the facing. The rule is that where there is a marble facing to a structure it consists of more or less heavy slabs. Only in a few early Augustan structures such as the Porta Praetoria at Aosta and the city gates of Spello was there a use of thinner slabs; but even in these cases the marble



FIGURE 6.—ARCH OF CONSTANTINE FROM THE NORTHEAST

is considerably thicker than the veneers on the arch of Constantine and was not colored. In fact, the technique of these veneered panels is a unique example of the transfer to the *exterior* of a structure of a process elsewhere used only for *interior* wall decoration. We are familiar with the use of colored marble veneers in the halls of Roman basilicas, *thermae*, palaces, etc., and with the transmission of this brilliant and permanent form

of interior decoration to Byzantine religious and civil art. The fact that only on the arch of Constantine, if I am not mistaken, is it used on an outside wall, is a further proof that it was not an



FIGURE 7.—ARCH OF CONSTANTINE; SOUTH FAÇADE, WESTERN PANEL

original but an emergency method, to solve a difficult problem of re-surfacing.

Before attacking the details of the treatment of the panel sur-

faces, the question of the surface of the arch masonry must be at least glanced at in so far as it affects these problems. The best view for this purpose is that given in Figure 6 looking diagonally from Northeast to Southwest; that is, across the north façade from the east end. This shows the original Domitianic masonry, practically untouched, of the whole short end, up to the main cornice and around the corner of the main face as far as the pilasters. It is plain how the triumphal frieze was cut into two courses of the old blocks in the third century and brought around the corners as far as the pilasters. Then, beyond the pilasters, the surface was cut away, a little earlier in the third century, around the pairs of medallions, in order to connect the medallions with the newly inserted friezes, and leaving these medallions as an oasis in a desert of third



FIGURE 8.—SACRIFICE TO APOLLO (N. 2);  
TOOLING MARKS



century work. For, in the centre, even the archivolts of the main arcade were recut. The architectural part of this transformation will be treated in another paper.

At present I shall merely say that the surface around the medallions was cut back between 11 and 12 centimetres, and that, after architrave above and sculptured frieze below had been used to frame the panels at top and bottom and pilasters at the sides, a coat of cement from 4 to 5 centimetres thick was spread over the ground of the panels and against this were set thin veneer slabs of various colored marbles, fastened also by lead, and forming a brilliant ground for the medallion reliefs. The veneering slabs varied in thickness from 0.75 to 1.5 centimetres. We cannot say what was the color scheme of the veneer, because it was almost entirely torn away during the Middle Ages. In prizing

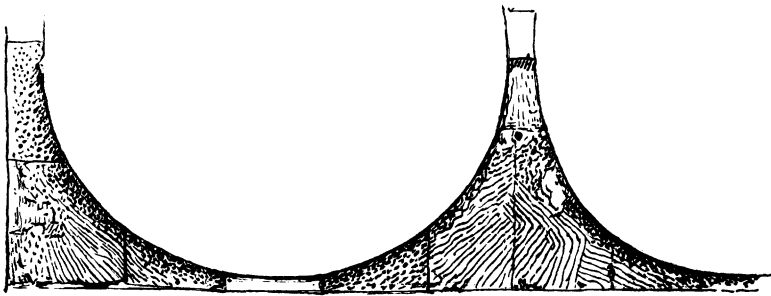


FIGURE 9.—TOOLING AT BASE OF BOAR HUNT AND SACRIFICE  
TO APOLLO (N. 1-2)

off the veneer a few fragments at the narrowest points were left—too small and few in number to tell much of a story. Many bunches of the cement backing remain. At intervals the square holes for the lead can be noted.

Except for the places where some cement remains we can study the tooling of the marble blocks, which is of course rough and intended to be concealed. Now, the technique of this tooling is interesting. In fact I believe it to furnish the strongest of all the arguments in favor of my theory that when the surface was cut away the medallions were already a part of the arch.

The tooling marks can best be studied on the north face, where the treatment, as I have already said, is quite different from that of the south face. There are two important peculiarities of this tooling: (1) that it is often continuous from one slab to

another across the joints; and (2) that its lines are extremely irregular and diagonal, being evidently determined in their direction, their changes, and juxtapositions by the previous presence of the medallions.

The facts can best be studied in the panel which contains the Boar Hunt and the Sacrifice to Apollo (N. 1-2), illustrated in Figures 7, 8, and 9. A piece of veneer remains at both top and bottom of N. 1, at the bottom of N. 2, and between them in the centre. The top piece is 12 cm. wide; the bottom pieces 7 cm. wide; the piece between the medallions is 16 cm. wide. All but the latter, which is porphyry, seem to be white marble. The porphyry fragment is 0.75 cm. thick, is set 5 cm. away from the surface of the masonry and 5.5 cm. back of the medallion frame.

The block forming the medallion base is very roughly and irregularly cut away near the frame of the medallion, so that the



FIGURE 10.—BASE OF SACRIFICE TO HERCULES (N. 4)

surface is not flat but curves concavely, especially at the narrower part of the neck, as if the work had been done after the frieze had been put in position.

The inference to be drawn from the direction and length of the tooling lines is extraordinarily clear. While this is comparatively evident in the photographic illustrations of Figures 7 and 8, I have made it plainer by a careful linear facsimile in Figure 9. The three characteristics I have already mentioned are here: The continuation of the lines across the joints; the fact that the tooling does not, as would be natural, follow the rectangular lines of the blocks; but that its lines are varied so as to show that they were conditioned by the medallion frames.

In Figure 10 is the lower part of N. 4 (Sacrifice to Hercules) where it is very plain how crudely the bottom was shaved away to make room for the frieze, which would otherwise have come directly against it. The light shining on the left curve of the

base shows how there is no joint below the point where it intersects the last vertical joint; that is, how the slab rises on a square base.

The reason then for considering the medallions an original part of the arch are:

(1) That they are of Domitianic art, and that the arch is Domitianic;

(2) That they are innocuous and generic in theme and so could be spared by the iconoclasts at Domitian's death;

(3) That they set in the masonry of the arch with perfect joints of the best period and with a square base that forms part of the course masonry;

(4) That they were already in the masonry when its face was cut back all around them to add the marble veneer, as is shown by the tooling;

(5) That they were already there when the friezes below were carved or set in, as is shown by the way it became necessary to mutilate their base line in order to leave any space between them and the frieze;

(6) That the changes in the imperial heads harmonize with the idea that the arch was used to commemorate triumphs of emperors of the third century before the time of Constantine.

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